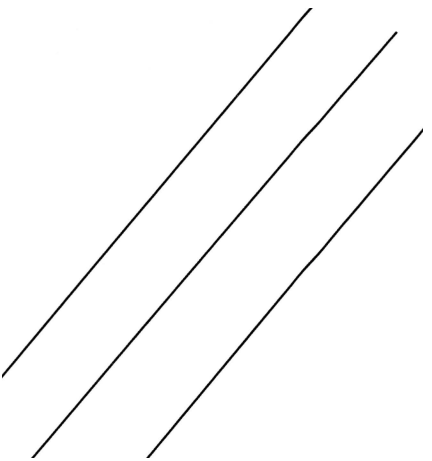
The Sydney Uni Strike:

Writing from the Worker-Student Assembly



The Sydney Uni Strike: Writing from the Worker-Student Assembly

1. Reflections on Striking at Sydney Uni

By K Box

Reproduced from mutinyzine.blog.com. Originally posted July 10, 2013

2. Precarious notes #1: 6 comments on the university and the dispute at USyd

By Mark G

Reproduced from sydneyuni.org. Originally posted June 9, 2013

3. Notes from the picketline

Anon.

Reproduced from sydneyuni.org. Originally posted May 12, 2013.

This pamphlet produced for the Sydney Anarchist Bookfair 2014 collects writing from the Sydney University Worker-Student Assembly about a series of strike actions that took place in 2013. Formal industrial action is over, however threats to staff conditions and repression from the industrial action is ongoing.

What is the University Worker-Student Assembly?
The assembly organises and agitates around the daily conditions of university workers and students. It is a space for raising grievances in our workplace and organising together through concrete and direct actions that improve conditions and build a culture of solidarity across the University of Sydney and beyond.

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1. Reflections on striking at Sydney Uni

By K Box

On the first strike at Sydney Uni I found myself on a picket chanting 'no class, class war,' as bemused young men with sports bags walked towards us over the Parramatta Road footbridge. Throughout that day such a complex welter of emotions stirred in me, but in that moment I felt amusement and an overwhelming sense of relief. It was a relief to be part of a collective response to the larger undercurrents that have been responsible for the many small discontents and everyday alienations of the ten years of university in my life.

The first strike was called in March this year, and four more followed, the last in early June. They were called as part of an enterprise bargaining campaign but seem to have focused the energy of many people frustrated with university management and their neoliberal push. This has been experienced particularly in the form of job cuts, increasing casualisation and diminishing work conditions, and its consequences are wide reaching and insidious. This economic agenda comes from beyond the university and engulfs it. Our experiences of its effects in the university are compounded by the ways it restructures our lives outside it. The university is a creator of workers as well as an exploiter of labour. It culturally assimilates people to middle class lifestyles and values, it offers a place for some critique of the social order, but not the means or, it seems often, the inclination to act on these critiques in substantial ways. The mounting pressures of strident neoliberalism, and the experience of the strikes seem to have catalysed around me a more robust response, and a more open discussion, about what people would like the university to be.

For me, the strikes have brought an intoxicating coalescence of camaraderie and action, allowed the forging of new connections, and opened up the space for more political conversations. My emotions, experiences and analysis have become entangled, and here I will try to explore and describe some of what I have felt and thought about the strike and the university. I want, too, to write something of the visceral experience of the pickets, of the weeks of strike: the joyfulness of the sudden release of tension that comes when you do the things you always dream of, and live just for a minute in that precise and perfect moment of struggle, however short-lived, alongside all your new best friends and strangers.

The First Day

I spent the first day of strike at the Parramatta Road footbridge picket. It was a scratchy day. Those of us

standing on the picket brought a mix of different political approaches and we lacked strong affinity or trust as a collective body. We struggled to make democratic decisions together, and as a result the political discussion was made up of isolated and prickly conversations between individuals. Arguments centred on how to make decisions on the picket, and whether and how to follow the union's protocol, which many of us did not feel was binding as we had no part in making it. Union officials and several others tried to control other picketers' behaviour without being willing to engage in discussion. I was asked several times to 'control my friends'. I felt politically squeezed from different sides, as different friends and comrades were frustrated with each other's tactics, but didn't feel comfortable having these conversations as a group. Students crossing the picket seemed to have little idea what the strike was about, or what crossing a picket might mean – many offering their support as they walked past. I felt ineffectual and inarticulate, wedged between different ideas about how to be effective with apparently no means to work out how to navigate these in order to have some coherent, democratic strategy. It provided tangible evidence of the way we are fragmented at the uni, and have grown unused to making decisions together without recourse to some higher power.

48 Hour Strike!

Before the next 48 hour strike many of us put a lot of effort into spreading the word about why there was a strike and how students could support it. At the 48 hour strike, the campus felt more politically aware and tense. Arguments on the pickets about union protocols and police continued, as more picketers chose to block traffic, and others organised disruptive actions such as making noise around the campus itself. Students who were antagonistic to the strike were angry and threatening. To me, it seemed that at least some of these conversations began to concentrate on the underlying political differences which caused them: disagreements about what kinds of action are legitimate, strategic or democratic, and disagreements about how the university should function. Police responded to disruptive tactics with brutality and arrests. Widespread solidarity for those brutalised was lacking, and some strikers even tried to defend police actions and involvement. The feeling of conflict on campus was tangible, with political faultlines exposed and raw. After the arrests and police brutality, and the antagonism and heartlessness of unsupportive students, I felt my own rage and frustration mounting. Walking around on the second day of the strike, beating a makeshift drum so hard I turned my thumb into a bloody mess, I didn't notice the pain and even the intimidating behaviour of macho students barely registered above my own anger. After more arrests I

reached my personal nadir, crying pitifully in the gutter outside newtown police station. The 48 hour strike felt like the breaking point – the point when it became harder for people to pretend the strikes weren't happening, but also the point when I felt the most broken.

Solidarity at the pickets

At the next strike, union officials and others still tried to enforce the union protocol, or even police interpretations of it, but I felt that the attrition of political arguments accompanied by police violence and unreasonableness was bringing people into tighter solidarity. Some of this might have happened because people with convergent political persuasions sought each other out on particular pickets, but the result was a stronger sense of support on those pickets which chose to prevent the entry of traffic. I missed the next strike but police violence continued, accompanied by arbitrary arrests intended to intimidate and break the strike. Since then, university management and police have continued to threaten students, staff and community members with time-consuming legal proceedings and other formal means of intimidation including campus bans and threats of expulsion.

In the face of these iniquities, solidarity has swelled and strengthened, although still with hiccups. It seems that the strikes have opened up space for the development of a more profound political conversation, and strengthened ties between different people and parts of the uni. In a time of overwhelming fragmentation, this solidarity is reassuring. Looking back to the first strike day, I find even my own self unrecognisable. Each strike, each conversation I felt more confident in making the political arguments I wanted to make about the university. My confidence stemmed from feeling the solidarity of others on the pickets, from conversations with others at the strikes and the meetings in between, and from the way the strike helped me to comprehend my own experiences of the university in a political context. In particular, explaining to students approaching pickets why I was there helped to condense many of my own experiences with an unexpected clarity. I realised, in the middle of a conversation with a student who thought staff had too much sick leave, that at the age of 29 I had never had a job with any kind of sick leave at all. I thought of days suffering from chronic depression, dragging myself from my room to teach, never relating my experience to the neoliberal changes at the university I had been involved in campaigning against. Explaining my working life to others, in the context of the excellent analysis provided by so many different people around the strikes, let me better comprehend it myself.

Alienation at the University

The strikes also helped me articulate and understand the ways alienation operates at the university. During the strikes, when the force of the state and security was most on show, it became more obvious how it operates implicitly on other days. The idea of professional protestors and outside agitators was very present, in media representations and management emails, but also on the pickets. Security pointed out to me people who they thought weren't students – class figured highly in their requirements of what students look like. Many students commenting on videos of pickets made comments such as "not a degree in sight" and suggested that none of the people in various clips were staff or students. Leaving aside how anyone could possibly know by face all of the staff and students of the university, and the fact that their claims were patently wrong, visual profiling of the categories of people who 'belong' in a university was common place as a means to describe people as outsiders. These claims were not only used to diminish the 'rights' of people to be involved in the dispute, but also to characterise anyone on the pickets as outsiders, thus reinforcing the alienation of people who do not appear to be privileged and who are not willing to culturally assimilate to elite values and political persuasions.

Neoliberalism in Daily Life

There are many privileges attendant to working and studying at university, and for a long time this has been coupled with the nostalgic image of the university as being above or outside of capitalism, which hides some of the ways the university exploits my labour. And yet I have many experiences of neoliberalism in my everyday life which are as conspicuous as the brute force which makes it viable on the days of the strike. As I ride along Eastern Avenue on busy mornings, my way is obstructed by markets and I can never decide what annoys me more, that there are shops selling shoes and bags on campus, or their pseudo market chic. Cops stroll about ever more confidently, military recruitment drives become more frequent, and entire haunted castles, ferris wheels and fairy floss stands materialise as I race by to meet deadlines and arrive at class on time. The university is decorated with advertising for what is effectively private tuition in the techniques of capitalist exploitation. The university has demolished and rebuilt at least one building each year of my attendance, while it claims to have no money for pay rises or resources for postgraduates. Whilst there is a temptation to imagine the university was once a pristine institution outside of capitalism, the truth is this campus has been intimidating from my first arrival. When I first attended uni in Newcastle, it felt like a liberation from the social stratification and the intense

and gendered social gaze of school – but Sydney Uni offered much more intimidating versions, intensified by class politics.

On the picket line at the first strike, I felt confused about what I was defending. At each succeeding picket, it became easier to articulate that I wanted to challenge all of these things. The strikes offered some of my first satisfying confrontations with particularly entitled and arrogant students who have always made me feel uncomfortable. At last I felt comfortable telling them what I thought the university should be, and even though it was pointless to engage with them, I was glad to render their ease slightly less comfortable.

2. Precarious notes #1: 6 comments on the university and the dispute at USyd

By Mark G

1. From the formal level of dispute to the submerged politics of work at the university

The industrial dispute at the University of Sydney currently represents one of the key conflicts involving higher education and the education economy more broadly in Australia. The acuteness of the antagonism at USyd is growing increasingly sharp. Over the past 24 months university management have made a series of decisions that have made university workers angry and lose trust. For example the handling of the library restructures since early 2011, the announcement of 350 job cuts across general and academic staff in late 2011 – early 2012, and most recently the approach to the enterprise agreement has created sharp antagonism leading into the bargaining of the enterprise agreement. A recent survey conducted by the university shows that more than 75% of respondents have no faith in the university management.[i] All of this represents good reason to be pissed off, and demonstrates its actuality. Yet it would be a mistake to think that all this anger is simply funnelled through the enterprise agreement, or that reaching even a favourable agreement will be able to resolve this anger. Whilst the dispute now is ostensibly focussed on the details of the enterprise agreement, beneath these formal dimensions there is a submerged world of the daily politics of work that is in fact the key terrain animating the antagonism.

Conversations in workplaces, meetings and on the picket lines provide the greatest insight into what is going on. These conversations uncover another world of the politics of work, where the daily compression of working life is creating growing anger and disillusion. [ii] The cutting of staff, growing overtime, general intensification of work and ongoing casualisation define the negative dimension of this submerged world of work. The atomisation, isolation, competitiveness and stress that result from the squeeze on work are a recurrent theme in these conversations. The very real lack of a future that many people, particularly young workers, see within the university is a further expression of this compression of one's life within the confines of the demands of the university. The frequency with which the idea of leaving the university is expressed is telling. This is all playing out across the conditions of academic and general staff, and this is the real substance of the antagonisms that

define university life.

It is quite clear that even at this negative level, the interests of workers and students at the university are in this sense in excess of the enterprise agreement. This excess should lead us to consider what there is already, and what more will need to happen, beyond the framework of the agreement. It is worth noting that many of the issues confronted on the daily level will not be addressed in the enterprise agreement. For this reason it is important to insist, particularly if we want to continue developing organisation and critique beyond the bargaining period, that this submerged politics of work is in fact the pivotal terrain that we need to understand and act from. Making this argument does not mean to undermine the dispute thus far in terms of its development around the enterprise agreement, but rather it is to insist that pushing further the politics that have bubbled to the surface of university life over the past two years requires that we continually create a political horizon beyond the formal level of the dispute.

In a number of respects this is already beginning to take some form. The fact that these conversations are happening immediately between workers and students themselves is one indication in itself. The move towards on the ground and bottom-up organising at a departmental and workshop level is a necessary and welcome tendency. Beyond this, the degree of collective autonomous organisation that is taking place by various groups of students and workers is creating a vibrancy, dynamism and longer-term perspective that is necessary. Each of these factors should not be overstated, but they do show that in spite of the negative dimension of university life, a collective political force is growing.

2. The materiality of the university and the problem of nostalgia

The above is directly relevant to how we understand the university – that is USyd and the university institution more generally. The image of the university of the past as an uncorrupted institution of learning, untouched by the social relations that define it, was always out of step with its realities, and is today an idea impossible to entertain for even a moment, and yet the nostalgia for this image remains. And whilst a growing awareness of the rearrangements of the organisation of work as well as the commodification of education is evident, the political and organisational implications of this remain less clear. To a significant degree, the responses to the question of how to organise within the university remain in the shadow cast by the above nostalgia. That is, even when the conditions of the university are met more or less soberly, the political orientation swings back to an idealised past that at best was based upon a different composition of university

labour, namely when it was possible to find an ongoing job. However, it is clear now this cannot be maintained, that the organisation of work and the product of the university is precisely of the world of capital.

The main limit of the image of nostalgia creates is that it is out of step with the current and developing class composition of the university, and it is basically an idea of the tenured professor's university. In this sense it is a horizon of political possibility and desirability that has little to nothing to do with the overall position of the university now, nor with the conditions of the vast majority of workers at the university. The problem then, is to begin from the actual materiality of the university, and to pose political and organisational questions firmly on this terrain, to resist the pull of nostalgia.

Doing so is a substantial task, much of which is beyond the scope of these comments. To briefly outline what this might involve, it would be necessary to consider at the very least the place of education in the overall economy; to consider what the primary outputs of research are; the shifting role of teaching within the university; the relationship between students, work and debt; the relationship between the university, the border, visas and migration, and so on. These issues would require a political response adequate to their specificity and how they function as an assemblage – for example, as has been pointed out by others, asking the question of how to subvert the role of the university as an institution complicit with border policing.

More immediate to the purpose of these comments is perhaps the impacts of the division of labour within the university. This is a question that needs to be taken up organisationally and politically. The most obvious general division is between general and academic staff, which each has its own respective divisions. Without going into any detail here, one issue that is relevant to general and academic staff (not to mention the workers in cafes and shops on campus) is that of casualisation and precarious work. In terms of the organisation of labour at the university, and the relationship between workers and the university, this is the pivotal and dominant question. It is this relationship that defines much of the materiality of the contemporary university.

The problem of precarity, most clearly manifest in casual work across the tertiary sector, is a very real one. Indeed it has been for some time now. As one example, workers employed on casual or fixed term contracts do over half of teaching work, and increasingly make up the numbers of library and IT services. It is a welcome development that the conversation around this issue has been taken up within the official perspective of the

unions, but the lateness with which they have arrived at the conversation is not without consequences. Namely, ongoing inabilities to pose the problem clearly, and thus engage the organisational difficulties that arise therefrom effectively.

The temporality of casual and precarious work, the speed, and the precise yet blurry mechanisms that punctuate it, constitutes a particular arrangement of one's life that is always in some sense a condition of working. [iii] This complicates the question of organisation, and is markedly distinct from the condition of established academics. Indeed, the layer of workers who constitute established academics is itself dwindling. Confronting this fact is the least that needs to happen. The real question and moment of conflict emerges from how young, casual workers understand their own condition and what they want to do about it. It is certain that on minor levels responses to this are already in motion, and have been for some time. Finding various circuits to amplify this process, defined by the workers themselves might be the best way to ask the organisational question.

3. Edu-factory and/or the service-university

There have been a number of initiatives that seek to come to terms with the position of the university in contemporary capitalism. The critique of the university as edu-factory is one of the more interesting of these, beginning from the hypothesis that 'as was the factory, so now is the university'. For the theorists of the edu-factory the university is a key site of antagonism between labour and capital, 'where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labour force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake'.[iv] Recent conferences organised by students in Canberra and Sydney have taken up this term, and used it as a lens to critique the university as they experience it today.

Given the emphasis on education and knowledge economies today for economic competitiveness and accumulation, the edu-factory is not really a controversial thesis. As a conceptual lens it is useful for understanding and critiquing a series of metrics to which labour at the university is subject. Regardless of where one works within the university, systems of measurement will be a familiar dynamic that sets various paces to your work. Such metrics form a kind of punctuation to work that resonates with the idea of standardised, homogenous factory work.

Nonetheless, the edu-factory and the image the factory conjures up is somewhat out of step with the non-linear, permanently working condition that defines so much university labour. In this sense, university labour is

also very much a form service work, with the often blurry and indistinct boundary between work and non-work time, and a complicated relationship to its object of production.[v] The service-university is evident in various ways. From the proliferation of cafes, kitchens, and retail around universities, to the services that keep libraries and IT labs running, to academic work and the content and form of teaching, a service dynamic is apparent as a defining element of university labour.

At various levels these questions complicate the image of industrial activity on campus.

4. Politics on the picket lines and the question of militancy

The picket lines, functioning for now as the most visible and collective moment of antagonism, bring all of the above issues and tensions together. The pickets are thus a complex political space, which bring into contact the various perspectives, interests and practices of different workers, students and groups. As such, the pickets have been a space of political composition that have helped to circulate stories and experience, as well as a place where various tensions have found their clearest expression.

There are many political perspectives, interests and groups involved in the pickets and the campaign more broadly. Each of these often have their own perspective on the best way to organise the pickets, make decisions, and on the overall goals of the campaign. One of the clearest questions that has arisen is that of who should be able to make decisions about the conduct of the pickets. At one level there is the picket protocol that is the official position on how union members should organise the pickets. There are a number of workers and picket marshals that argue that this is the final word, and that it should be followed strictly. Others see the protocol more as a field within which, depending on circumstances, various decisions and actions can be justified. Still others have argued that the picket lines themselves should be able to decide how they organise themselves, and what actions they take. Very useful, if at times heated, debate about these questions has occurred across most of the strike days. In fact, each of these perspectives is of greater or lesser influence on different picket lines. However, it is important to emphasise the importance of the latter perspective, which sees the picket line as a political space in its own terms that is organised by the participants on it. This perspective allows those who are participating to make meaningful and active decisions about the form and content of the politics of the dispute. This perspective helps to build the democratic organisational capacities of the workers and students involved.

One point that has been heard raised

in conversation is that of the degree of a stake that participants in the pickets have in the outcome of the dispute. From this perspective if staff members think that diverging from picket protocol will damage the campaign and undermine the agreement with management then this interest should be respected over those of other participants who diverge from the strict adherence to the protocol, or who may not work at the university, as those who do not work at university have nothing to directly lose in this. However, it is not the case that there is agreement within the university staff that sticking to picket protocol is the most tactical, strategic or desirable decision to make. Many workers have been involved in pickets that have held the picket lines when they have tried to be closed by police. Moreover, many staff have been involved in debates with union marshals and other workers on the picket lines and made arguments that those on the picket should be the ones to make the decisions about what tactics they use. It is also clear that in a number of cases it is only through the process of resisting the breaking of the picket lines that the pickets have managed to effectively close the entrance being picketed.

There are good reasons to be positive about the debates, decisions and development of the pickets, including the decisions to hold the lines against the police. At the same time, it is necessary to be cautious in overstating the significance of this. Whilst an accumulation of political experience and confidence is evident on the picket lines, it is also unclear as yet whether the growing antagonism on the pickets is an expression of the overall direction of a growing number of participants and reflective of the strength of the campaign, or rather indicative of growing polarisation between participants. Polarisation can be important, and can open up greater political space, but it can also close down communication and debate when it is precisely more communication and debate that needs to happen. Awareness of this latter point is necessary for maintaining a strong campaign immediately, as well as for ongoing organising beyond the formal dispute.

The question of militancy has also recurred throughout the conversations at the pickets and about them. The question of militancy is in some respects a deceptively simple one. That is, a common argument is that if a picket line holds against the demands to move and let a car through, then this is a more militant picket than one that does not make this decision. On some level, there is truth in this, and for my part, if a picket line decides it wants to hold the line then that is what it should do. Of course, there is still another question here about decision-making – and there is no reason to assume at the outset that just because a picket decided to hold that

the decision was made democratically. However, it is also useful to have an understanding of militancy that is not simply defined by willingness for physical conflict. As noted above, there is no necessary reason to assume that just because a picket line held that therefore the campaign is stronger – more needs to happen for this to be the case. At the same time, there are any number of minor shifts that can take place that indicate a growing radicalisation than does the amount of physical conflict with the police.

5. Cops, policing and edu-capital

A further aspect to the dispute that has received a lot of attention has been the policing of the picket lines. The police tactics and the arrests are definitely worthy of condemnation. Further, the fury and contempt that people feel for the police is legitimate and understandable. But we might gain something if we focus not on the particular dispositions of individual cops, but rather place the actions of the police in the context of the particular dispute underway at the university of Sydney, and the broader processes of restructuring education. That is, the use of repressive force in this context is better explained not through the poor moral fibre of Spence nor the malevolence of individual cops, but rather by acknowledging that the dispute here is but one aspect of a deeper conflict. The process of restructuring that is playing out, and dynamics and contradictory interests that are expressed through it, at some level always involve the use of force, and in this instance the repressive force of the state is necessary to secure the interests of the functionaries of capital.

On the other hand, there is very good reason to take the trauma, anxiety and fear that the police have caused seriously. As others have noted, the actions of the police do have a real impact on people's ability to maintain participation in these forms of conflict. Perhaps one way to acknowledge this, and to do something with it, is to valorise the many other ways of acting and participating in this struggle that are not defined by physical confrontation with the police. The effectiveness of any political activity is always dependent on a variety of activities coming together coherently and meaningfully.

6. Where next?

This is now the key question. There are two levels to the response to this question, but these are related. One remains within the framework of the enterprise agreement and the specific campaign targeting this. The second is that of ongoing organising beyond the current dispute, involving the development of infrastructures of collective, bottom-up, democratic organisation, and connecting these together.[vi]

The pickets and strikes have been effective so far, and the level of activity on campus shows a lot of potential. In terms of the immediate dispute, the means by which to escalate the campaign is a key one. The strike, at the very least for academic staff, is geared towards the university as teaching institution. This is evident to the degree that whilst the strike shuts down campus and classes, the rhythm of research work is not effectively interrupted by such activity. This is not to undermine the effectiveness of the strike activity so far, but merely to be realistic about what strikes achieve in a place like the university, and to challenge us to think harder about what other options there are. In some respects this comes back to the question of the edu-factory and the service-university – in the factory a strike had a more total effect on production, but between the edu-factory and the service-university, it has perhaps only partial effect.

Other options that have been raised include work bans, withholding of marks and other such activity. These options also do not address the relationship of our labour time to the process of research and the role of this in the university. On another level, and this came up in a conversation on the picket line, it is not clear that these options would be as effective as a strike, and may possibly undermine the strike action. These are difficult questions to answer.

Perhaps one way of addressing the relationship of research to the university, and the difficulty of separating this work from the valorisation of the university, is to develop counter and co-research spaces that explicitly address the critique of the university. [vii] Such co-research spaces with a political focus can be simultaneously at the edge of the university, as well as aimed against it. Further, such spaces could break down the hierarchies of who the "thinkers" of the university are, and begin to draw connections between academic staff, general staff and students and create a common political space of conversation, research and action. To be clear, such research would not replicate academic research, but develop common relationships between those involved. If it is so difficult to subvert the relationship between research labour from the interests of the university, then perhaps the best option is to develop counter spaces that delink our activity from the university as capital, and break down the divisions of labour imposed by the university.

On the second level of the question of where next, the clear need is for the development of participatory spaces from which staff and students can organise themselves directly, and develop decision making power around the immediate issues they face.

[i] These figure have been cited, though I don't yet have the original reference: Change is handled well in the University of Sydney (22%)

There is good communication across all sections of the University of Sydney (23%)

The University of Sydney is good at learning from its mistakes and successes (25%)

The Senior Executive Group listen to other staff (26%)

The way the University of Sydney is run has improved over the last year (27%)

Knowledge and information are shared throughout the University of Sydney (27%)

And see this http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/sydney-uni-staff-rank-as-most-dissatisfied-20130608-2nwrt.html

[ii] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a4ckb3X3Zs and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WwaIilRLGo

[iii] For more on this see Angela Mitropoulos, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/mitropoulos/en and http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/mitropoulos/en

see also http://xterrafirma.wordpress.com/2013/05/29/cleanout/

[iv] Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, 'Notes on the edu-factory and cognitive capitalism'

[v] For a more extended and developed discussion of ideas concerning a service university, debt and indentured labour see Angela Mitropoulos' http://s0metim3s.com/2011/12/20/student-debt/

[vi] On infrastructure: http://s0metim3s.com/2012/12/28/infrastructure/. See also for relevant material chapter 2 here http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=516 and also herehttp://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/treasonous-minds-capital-universities-the%E2%80%A8-ideology-intellectual-and-desire-mutiny

[vii] This is drawing from practices within Italian autonomist marxism, and recent projects such as the colectivo situaciones eg http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en

just saw this too http://xterrafirma.wordpress.com/2013/06/06/strikespace/

3. Notes from the picketline

These are some notes on the issues surrounding the recent strike days at the University of Sydney – the institution where I work. I'm not so concerned with describing what happened at the strike as with some of the strategic questions about the situation at the university in the hope of creating some sort of ongoing, radical, worker and student collective action that might counter the neoliberal onslaught. I'm also not going to go into any detail about the crucial role of education in the Australian economy and what the neoliberal restructuring of higher education looks like, even if these are obviously part of the larger context surrounding all of this. Those articles have been written elsewhere. For the sake of some structure – so that it wouldn't just be a collection of random thoughts – I have divided this into three constituent parts: the workers; the unions; and the students.

The workers themselves (often as members of, but not wholly reducible, to the bureaucratic unions that represent them)

The university is a difficult site to describe as a workplace due to it covering such a broad range of activities and conditions under which those activities take place. From the academic work of teaching and research to all functions covered by general staff – from all types of admin work, to the libraries, to I.T., to groundskeeping and maintenance, to tradies – the disparate types of work and workers mean it is difficult to provide a cohesive picture of the university as a workplace. What can be said though, is the people who do work at here in all those varied roles retain the potential to shape not only their work conditions, but the very image of higher education at this institution.

The truth is that it was not these most recent moments of industrial action that drew a line in the sand between workers and management. In fact it is not even correct to describe the line in the sand in such a way. Whatever lines that exist have slowly been drawn over a number of years as the university has moved ever onwards towards being a fully-fledged neoliberal institution. The division is between those who see this and realise the consequences of it on their working conditions and their education and those who support this drive by management – which undoubtedly includes some number of workers and students. Over a number of years, across all sectors we have seen an increasing casualisation and contracting out of positions, which in turn has led to less permanent staff having more work forced downwards on them. If any line in the sand has been drawn, it wasn't by the unions during this round of enterprise bargaining,

but by management 18 months ago when it confidently announced the cutting of 350 jobs across all sectors of the university.

So firstly, what needs to be said, is that where I work people do recognise the 'big picture'. This is not just about basic conditions like leave and pay. Instead there has been increasingly angry talk of needing to 'take a stand' as workers, talk that reached its pinnacle about the time that those job losses were announced and that has been bubbling away ever since. Sentiments are openly being expressed about the eternal conflict between workers and management and now even moving towards larger critiques of corporate culture and neoliberal capitalism (and it might be worth mentioning here that I don't work in an academic department but as the lowest level of general staff in another part of the uni). Undoubtedly the move towards strike action in the last few months has been a contributing factor to these things coming out into the open.

As things have escalated in these last few months there has been a growing degree of involvement and ownership over these actions by ordinary workers – this was particularly evident between the first strike and the second one. Folk were taking on talking to colleagues and students, putting posters and other propaganda around the place and also having not so discreet conversations about who was likely to scab. I think people definitely attained a newfound sense of empowerment as workers through their involvement in these industrial actions. However, while I have mentioned that folk are aware of the 'bigger picture' politics of all of this, I don't think this ownership extends to a perspective of ongoing strategy or 'the long game'. While they may take on smaller day to day union activities, they are more likely to leave longer term questions of strategy to the union bureaucracy. This is a problem of the state of class struggle in Australia for which the mainstream unions must take a hell of a lot of blame (more on this later).

So it is that, even as folk have become more outspoken and I think generally more empowered, they have channeled that in the main through the bureaucratic functioning of the NTEU or CPSU. This was most evident in the willingness to stick closely to union protocols (protocols that had not been discussed or decided upon by the membership) on the picket-line, even if the actions deemed acceptable in the protocols fell well short of what was required to truly close the university. This was also down to most people's lack of experience and confidence in a strike situation – this sort of industrial action is so demonised in mainstream culture that folk had to contend with their own sense that they were doing something so drastic and confronting that they had to tread very carefully. This led to a general, though not absolute, timidity on the pickets from many workers.

Further to this, the picket-lines were not necessarily (except in a few minor cases) treated as spaces for enacting participatory democracy and so discussions about the purpose of the pickets were not carried out here. The most necessary one I could see, was a discussion about whether the pickets were there as a place to engage students and scabbing workers or to simply attempt to close the university. I think a lot of workers initially lent towards the first idea, but by the second day of the 48hour strike had recognised the people trying to enter then had generally made their decision. I consider it a positive that the strike action galvanised folk to the extent they had to make a call about where they stand.

There's no point naively assuming we can ultimately convince most people of our stance by the force of reasoned argument. This is a flawed, liberal idea that all people will as individuals decide their political positions by weighing up a series of a pros and cons. Within this framework we are simply expected to accept the 'right' of this decision even if it is immediately undermining the collective conditions of others. My response is that we need to make the picket-line a collective show of workers' force, not in our capacity to win one-on-one individual arguments but by being immoveable as a group so that people experience a totally different version of political practice that doesn't rely on the middle-class vision of 'polite debate'. A problem that generally goes unmentioned is that there are many different class positions occupied by union members at the uni – tenured academics and middle management tend not to have the same class interests as casual tutors, library assistants and building attendants – in fact many of them are happy to hark back to the 'glory days' when the uni was just a different type of elite institution. These contradictions do need to be drawn out so that the actions of workers aren't unduly influenced by those higher up in the employment chain, a factor that clearly should bear no relevance on the activities of a union.

From this summary of some of the key things I noticed amongst people I work with around these industrial actions, I would suggest that what clearly stands out is the need for encouraging workers to claim more ownership over struggles that are their own. This simply means that more spaces need to exist where discussions about conditions and strategy can take place. This needs to occur as an ongoing thing so that when moments of action do occur that galvanise people it will be these grassroots participatory structures that inform how we proceed. I have been inspired by the response of people I work with to the need to step up and take industrial action and actually participate in making it happen. Unfortunately, I do not think that this will easily transfer into a more ongoing engagement and clearly once this period of struggle is over the

union hierarchy will do everything as usual to ensure workers do return to a more docile state. So now is a time to attempt to move forward on creating alternative spaces for this energy and momentum to cohere into other, less bureaucratic and more effective, forms of workplace organising.

The unions (a messy tangle of bureaucracy)

For years the unions on campus have done nothing to encourage workers to claim ownership and be active in making their union a real force of collective power. They have effectively become an intermediary between management and their members – structuring their activity around enterprise agreement bargaining and individual grievance resolution. No wonder most workers do not look at belonging to a union as a reflection of their collective will, but as a representative body that lobbies on their behalf. And it seems the bureaucratic hierarchy calling the shots has little interest in changing this situation. Members meetings serve not as democratic decision-making spaces, but as a room that rubber-stamps the motions of the executive. Even as recently as the announcement of the mass job cuts, the best the NTEU could come up with was a series of rallies where boring dignitaries postured and promised 'a fight'. Despite mobilising many workers this failed to maintain any momentum due to completely failing to let those mobilised workersbe the campaign. As usual this campaign belonged to the NTEU hierarchy and workers were encouraged merely to support it.

This crucial sense of ownership and empowerment is clearly a hard thing to pin down, but I think these are the key elements we are trying to foster to create a radical space of workplace organising. With all the problems the unions pose it would seemingly be preferable to create such a space free from their machinations. However, we do have to contend with the fact that at the university they are still where most workers look to when they are up for a fight. So we walk a fine line of making things happen autonomously while still being connected to the functioning of the union. The casuals group is a good example – having formed separately to the NTEU it has now come under its wing with the resources on offer from the union being a solid reason. However, it now will have an ongoing struggle to retain its own decision-making capacity free from the dictates of the stifling union leadership that seem to have no good ideas of their own.

The presence of two unions on campus (the CPSU and NTEU) who are often at best ambivalent to each other, at worst hostile (even if this period of industrial action has seen some thawing of relations), does present a space for us to focus the creation of autonomous spaces of organising.

That is, something like the Worker Student Assembly doesn't have to place itself as in opposition to the bureaucratic unions, but is a necessary space of encounter for general staff, academic staff and students on campus to contextualise the conditions they work or study under in terms of the experiences of others. It is place where a practice of non-bureaucratic, self-organisation can hopefully take hold to begin to create a culture that can overcome the stifling hierarchical processes of the unions.

The students (still quite a few good 'uns, but certainly not any sort of radical force)

The sustained mythology of students as a potential radical force can be seen in the number of socialist groups that continue to make their presence on campus. But it seems entirely misplaced at an institution like Sydney University. Here the elite class position of many of the students is thick in the air. So, one material condition we have to face is that an education institution like Sydney University has always been about reproducing the upper and middle classes. And while it is not as much purely a domain of the privileged as it might have been in the past, the next material condition we have to face is that the experience of being a student has totally been changed by the effects of the neo-liberal program against higher education. As such we have a situation of students who have come to identify as consumers purchasing an education that is nothing more than a commodity – as witnessed by the number who crossed the picketline with the excuse that they had paid for the particular class they were going to.

The cluelessness of so many students – even those who made claims of supporting our 'cause' while breaking the pickets – about the significance of a strike and a picketline speaks to the decimation of any culture of class struggle and organising in Australia. However, due to their historical resonance as a political actor, the failure of students to really grasp this display of collective workers' power was particularly disappointing for many picketers. I think the situation can be read as a combination of two factors. One is that assertion of education as a commodity, a service to be paid for that in return the consumer will be provided with the qualifications to further their economic prospects (in theory). The university as an entire physical and social space seems to reinscribe these values and when added to the high cost of living in Sydney, results in a student body less able or willing to engage with their education and the university as a whole in a political way. So staff are merely seen as service providers which students have no affinity with. Apart from these material conditions there is also the ideological factor that I have already described,. That is, the dominance of liberalism as the discourse of 'progressive' or 'left' issues

means that an individual, identity-based formation of political action – that is at odds with the necessary collective presence of class struggle – is the framework through which many students view a cause to be fought for.

Having said all this, it still does seem that there is likely to be some degree of an ongoing radical student presence on campus. However, the degree that this presence is dominated by those who see their interests reflected in the dilettante politicking of the SRC will ensure that this section of student activists will have little resonance in wider struggle. In a similar – though not at all exact – way to the workers on campus, one thing that clearly stands out is the need for an example of something more assertive and autonomous, something unhindered by bureaucratic factionalism. There have been a few small examples of these and the strikes themselves provided further opportunity. Originally the unions (the NTEU in particular) tried to constrain the possible actions of students to 'supporting the workers on the pickets', but at the 48 hour strike some students thankfully broke from this. Entering the university – making a militant claim on those parts of the uni that were trying to act as if the strike was not occurring – to enact roving pickets was a positive step. However, even in these moments the dominance of certain organisations and self-appointed student 'leaders' that always sought control restrained the possibility of action.

At this point then, it does seem likely that any sort of radical momentum to arise from the university will come in the main from those who work in this sector (despite some of the difficulties I described earlier). That however, doesn't mean student action should in any way be restricted to merely 'supporting' staff in what they do. Clearly, students have much more room to move – and simply are usually more inspired and creative – in terms of what sought of militancy they enact. This has the potential to change the landscape of political action at the university, but much like the workers they first have to free themselves from the bureaucratic machinations of the organisations that supposedly 'represent' them. It seems that students actually have far less to lose in doing this then any individual worker does.

A summary (in one sentence)

It seems that the experiences of the strike lead to the obvious enough lesson (one that is unfortunately typically easier said then done): that breaking the stranglehold of tired, old bureaucracies and creating the spaces to practice autonomous, non-hierarchical self-organisation is the only thing worth attempting from here in terms of radical organising at Sydney University.

Banner from Sydney Uni Strike, 2013

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